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SUBJECT: STATE MINISTER BAKRADZE ON DEVELOPMENTS IN ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

Classified By: Ambassador John Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) State Minister for Conflict Resolution David Bakradze briefed the diplomatic corps December 6 on his taking leave of absence to become spokesperson for the presidential campaign of Saakashvili and the United National Movement party for the January 5 election. Georgian law allows a minister to participate in a campaign provided he takes leave from his government position. Deputy State Minister Ruslan Abashidze is in charge while Bakradze is on leave.

¶2. (C) Bakradze updated the diplomatic corps on the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He emphasized that Georgia wants to keep the situation in both separatist areas as calm as possible during the election period and assured us that Georgia plans no actions that could increase tensions. Regarding Abkhazia, Bakradze said he called de facto foreign minister Shamba last week and communicated through an intermediary with de facto president Bagapsh to deny Russian allegations that Georgia plans an attack on December 12 and to convey the message that Georgia wants no problems. Bakradze said Bagapsh agreed there should be no trouble during this period and both agreed to communicate if concerns arise. Regarding Bagapsh's recent imposition of a state of emergency and statement that the Abkhaz will acquire more military hardware, Bakradze said Georgia isn't very concerned. He said the Abkhaz armed forces are so poorly trained and led that a few more heavy weapons wouldn't make much difference. He did express concern that this could be used as cover for Russia to move more military hardware into Abkhazia. He stressed that the Georgians have no evidence this is happening, at this point it is only a concern.

¶3. (C) Bakradze complained about the statement by Member of Russian Duma Gryzlov that in January the Duma would consider Abkhaz and South Ossetian declarations of independence. He said the statement is especially troubling because Gryzlov is a serious politician and a member of Putin's circle. Bakradze said the statement impedes the peace process because it reduces the incentive of the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to negotiate.

¶4. (C) In response to a comment that Saakashvili's recent public statements about resolving the conflicts soon are inflammatory, Bakradze said Saakashvili's statements were mischaracterized. On Abkhazia, Saakashvili said the IDPs would be returning soon, which has long been a shared goal of Georgia and the international community and is not inconsistent with peaceful resolution of the conflict. Georgia wants to increase emphasis on developing a framework for IDP return to all parts of Abkhazia, not just the Gali district; not all at once but in accordance with a plan. What's important is that the process should start. On South Ossetia, Saakashvili's statement that the conflict could be resolved soon is not a threat but is recognition of the situation on the ground. Developments within South Ossetia

have created a situation in which the de facto authorities could disappear at any time; it could take weeks, it could take months. He used the analogy of a baby's loose tooth: Georgia has been wiggling it and knows how loose it is, but will let it fall rather than pull it out.

15. (C) Bakradze reiterated Georgia's support for the concept of a comprehensive UN review of the Abkhazia negotiating framework. He recently told UNOMIG chief Jean Arnault that the period of election is not a good time to push the idea, but in January we should return to it. In a meeting Arnault held on December 5 with the Western Group of Friends missions in Tbilisi, all agreed it is important to pursue the UN review as a way to seize initiative and build momentum on conflict resolution, but this isn't the right moment to push in Tbilisi or Moscow. The UN review concept will be on the agenda for discussion at the UNSYG Group of Friends meeting in Oslo next week.

TEFFT